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The Reconciliation and Submission in a Heroic Manner in Shakespeare-Fletcher's *the Two Noble Kinsmen* and W. B. Yeats's *the Death of Cuchulain*

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Abstract

Not all noticeable literary figures have been opportune enough to be afforded with an all-time opportunity to lead the way as gloriously as they have done at the shining moments of their literary career. When it comes to prominent literary figures like Shakespeare, no blemish appears to have ever tarnished his magnificence; moreover, his impact upon other presumably great literary figures has also been extensively proved and discussed. This study endeavors to trace the Shakespearian influence and echo in a play by another celebrated poet and dramatist who by his own self has confessed the former's deep influence both upon his thoughts and works. The parallel is drawn between Shakespeare's assumed last play, i.e. The Two Noble Kinsmen written in collaboration with Fletcher and W.B. Yeats's last play of Cuchulain cycle, i.e. The Death of Cuchulain. The resonance detected in these late works reiterates once more that it is not merely in the realm of fantasy that old age does not necessarily blocks the road taken to attain "tragic joy in the sublime" and that even reconciliation and submission can also be treated in a heroic manner. W.B. Yeats's The Death of Cuchulain is to be scrutinized in this study in the light of the Shakespearian influence upon it regarding its being produced in the late period of his literary career as Fletcher-Shakespeare's The Two Noble Kinsmen has also been written in a similar stage of life. Once more Shakespeare's subversive style is to be noted for its capability to mingle both the joyful and the tragic in another tragicomedy in order to display some other manifestation of life and at the same time act as supposedly another stimulus for W.B. Yeats's sought for "tragic joy" when he was "old and grey and full of sleep".

Keywords: *Reconciliation and Submission; Heroic Manner; Shakespeare-Fletcher; Yeats; The Two Noble Kinsmen; The Death of Cuchulain; Comparative Literature*

Introduction

Although about a hundred years' critical opinion has been divided as to whether Shakespeare did or did not write a large part of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, there is as Theodore Spencer states in his essay "The Two Noble Kinsmen", "opinion of equal weight on the other side, and it is" (225), as he believes,

"now generally agreed that Shakespeare wrote Act I, scenes 1-3; Act III, scene 1; Act V, except scene 2, and possibly more, and that he was equally responsible with Fletcher for the characterization" (225). Even though Shakespeare's reputation appears to rest principally upon his great tragedies, his other works among which his tragicomedies also do possess qualities to touch the deepest feelings if not seemingly as equal as the former but simultaneity sufficiently noticeable to be scrutinized. *The Two Noble Kinsmen,* for instance, shares many concerns with his so-called final plays from Pericles on, but it resembles the disquieting works of the early 1600's too. As Richard Proudfoot has suggested, Shakespeare in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* calls "in question some of the conclusions of earlier plays."(qtd. in Berggren 1984, p.3). If *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida* are "problem comedies," *The Two Noble Kinsmen* might best be dubbed a "problem romance." (qtd. in Berggren 1984, p. 3). If we accept Shakespeare as the norm, as he certainly is the giant, of "modern" tragedy, according to L.B. Reid, then the case is different, and harsher when his tragedies are considered in the light of Greek tragedies. Reconciliation "certainly does not occur in Shakespeare as Reid states in "Yeats and Tragedy", in "any simple mea culpa, take-me-to-heaven sense" (Reid 392); Shakespearian tragic heroes are "reconciled" and "reconstituted"- too late-before death, but not "resurrected," not other than fatally dead" (392). As for final "peripeteia", even though it can scarcely be traced in either the Greek or Modern tragedies, this peripeteia, "from grief to joy," (392) can be noticed in W. B. Yeats's final poems and plays where the acceptance of the discipline of disaster constitutes initiation into tragic maturity-the only true maturity.

Yeats himself locates this spiritual complex in the ends of Shakespeare's tragedies; and Bradley, too, felt there an extra-Aristotelian emotion and called it "exultation." It is an affirmation beyond the relative neutrality of catharsis. Perhaps we do have to list this among the great standard emotions of "systematic" tragedy, though to me it seems much more typically Shakespearean than Greek (399). As Jahan Ramazani observes in his "Tragic Joy and the Sublime", Yeats most memorably conjoins the tragic and the sublime in his description of Shakespearean heroes who encounter their deaths with an ecstatic enlargement of vision, in his poem "Lapis Lazuli" "Heaven blazing into the head; / Tragedy wrought to its uttermost" (qtd. in Ramazani 1989, p.162). Even though as a tragicomedy, *The Two Noblemen* might not appear to be readily lending itself to the tragedy's so-called grand effects and attributes, but there might still be some room left for a distinction as long as one might take Yeats's statement in one of his essays for consideration when he writes "the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy" (qtd. in Ramazani 164). If in theory sublime can be perceived as overlapping with lyric, epic and tragedy, it would not be all that far-fetched if it be conceived as drawing near tragicomedy hence its touching ground with tragedy partially at least. From this viewpoint, it would most probably be more accurate if Yeats's theory of "tragic joy" is to be regarded since the sublime "transforms the painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence" (162).

The Objectives of the Study

This paper endeavors to study the theme of reconciliation and submission in a heroic manner in *The Two Noble Men* by Shakespeare-Fletcher and *The Death of Cuchulain* by W. B. Yeats. These two works have also been contextualized in this study as another objective of this paper.

Significance of the Study

Even though a huge number of studies have been done upon the works of included authors, in no single paper the theme of reconciliation and submission embedded in a heroic manner in these two works, i.e., *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Death of Cuchulain* has ever been discussed.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study is based on Remak's theory about interdisciplinary studies. According to Remak's "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function", comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts, on the other (Remak 1961, p.1-57). Comparative literature itself as A. Anushiravani observes, does not have a single definition and does not rely on a specific theory, approach and method. Basically, the vitality and the secret of the survival of comparative literature among the multitude of theories and criticism approaches and literary research methods, especially in the contemporary era, is due to its being dynamic and flexible (Aushiravani 2012, p.3). The theme of reconciliation and submission in a heroic manner in *The Two Noble Men* by Shakespeare-Fletcher and *The Death of Cuchulain* by W. B. Yeats. has been inspected and analyzed through the use of descriptive-analytical method in the plays chosen for this study; the plays have been contextualized.

The Theme of Death

Death has always been one of the recurrent themes and concerns for many theorists, from the classical Longinus to some as modern as Heidegger and Bloom; they all have also had their own various concepts of the sublime. Although theorists of the sublime often refer to death by other names, or by what Kenneth Burke terms "deflections": nothingness, castration, physical destruction, semiotic collapse, defeat by a precursor, and annihilation of the ego, but it is in Yeats that the sublime is explicitly a staged confrontation with death: his tragic heroes as he himself states in his *Essays* in their final utterances convey "the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death" (Yeats 1961, 522-23).

Yeats's late plays are more compressed and preoccupied with limiting the time and space in which the action unfolds; they as Iryna Senchuck observes in her "*The Evolution of W. B. Yeats's Idea of a Drama: from On Baile's Strand* to *'The Death of Cuchulain'* "completely rely on the techniques of 'separating strangeness', the use of mask, dance, music, rhythm, structural and ritual repetition" (81). Yeats's late plays can thus be described as "restrained, condensed and focused" (81). Shakespeare's works resonated for both unionists and nationalists alike and as Philip Edwards notes, 'for a large number of educated Irish people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries … Shakespeare's plays [were] an indispensable part of their cultural life'" (qtd. in Lougnae et al 2016, p. 218). In this respect, it also reminds us of Ireland's unique position as a metropolitan colony, which "shared longstanding and pervasive cultural, economic and political ties with imperial England" (218). A number of recent critics have revealed how Shakespeare was 'recruited', 'enlist[ed]' or 'reinterpreted' by Irish nationalists during the Revival to suit 'their own strategic purposes on the basis of being aware that these connections, especially at the cultural level, are not "monolithic or unidirectional" (218).

Yeats's three one-act plays–*On Baile's Strand*, *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Death of Cuchulain*–are all representative for the evolution of Yeats's dramatic style and technique from the conventional poetic mode to a more experimental form for verse drama. Though all three plays took as their source Cuchulain myth, Yeats treated it with considerable freedom: being not interested in recounting the legend of Cuchulain for informational motives, the playwright rather used it as theme to reveal moments of intense feeling and to communicate larger issues of nation and politics. Thus, according to Unterecker Cuchulain transforms into the "myth-founded Mask of Ireland which, being opposite to the modern world, was the Mask for the modern world"(qtd. in Senchuck 2017, p.72), contributing to his idea of the Unity of Culture. The first play in which Yeats's concentration on Cuchulain's fate is demonstated is *On Baile's Strand* (1904); in this play the hero confronts his destiny. J. Flannery considers *The Death of Cuchulain* to be "the most perfect early realization of his dialectical drama" (qtd. in Senchuck 2017, p. 72). The conflict of this play is centered on the physical world of imposed social norms and material

values which are represented by Conchubar and the idealistic and individualized mode of existence that are personified by Cuchulain, and "the conflict between political mediocrity and heroism" (Senchuck 2017, p.72). Despite his heroic and freedom-loving nature, Cuchulain is forced to surrender to Conchubar's will and that is the very dimension that makes the situation more tragic:

And I must be obedient in all things;

Give up my will to yours; go where you please;

Come when you call; sit at the council-board

Among the unshapely bodies of old men.

I whose mere name has kept this country safe. (Yeats 2011, 157)

The Theme of Conflict

This conflict between an individual and community eventually "transforms into the inner conflict of Cuchulain, which drives the action of the play as tragedy" (73)—from the scene when, realizing his alienation, the hero in the closing scenes swears Conchubar's oath of obedience and that is when he kills his unrecognized son, goes mad in his grief and "turns to attack the sea which 'masters him'" (73). As Jahan Ramazani states in his *Yeats and the Poetry of Death, Elegy, Self-Elegy and the Sublime*, in Yeats's lyrics of tragic joy, "the speakers laugh into the face of death; in his plays, Cuchulain, Senchan and Naoise bravely encounter their own destruction" (8) as if they are embracing the tragic joy in a reconciliatory manner with no complains.

The juxtaposition set between the dying and the newborn in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* might bespeak of regeneration and reconciliation, but what makes this sort of thought felt in such a late play different from the ones felt in the early plays is that destruction and decay are also strongly felt that even though the loss might be justified, it is done with no "pretending to excuse it" (Berggren 1984, p.3). Even the acceptance implied in this play is not left apart from the painful transition from innocence to experience" (3). As Beggren observes *The Two Noble Kinsmen* "aspires to a similarly grand and comprehensive acceptance, but, like the earlier comedies, focuses on the trials in between birth and death" (3). Unlike what romances and comedies most often endeavor to bring home, the comic side of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* appears to be in want of wise old men and carefree playful youths; from Beggrren's viewpoint unfortunately *The Two Noble Kinsmen* makes no attempt to explicate how one stage leads into the other. "Without satisfactorily bridging this gap, the play never progresses to that serenity in retrospection and sublimity of anticipation that the fully achieved romances reach in their conclusions" (3). The shadow of doubt hat hovers above *The Two Noble Kinsmen* when it comes to attaining the sublime can also be noticed at the end of Yeats's *Death of Cuchulain*. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* has its own struggle, but the movement toward fulfillment is not altogether much unlike being "mired in the impossibility of moving freely from intention to achievement "(3). No sign of any return to the lost health is there and the ending of the play is even polluted with the "gross stuff". What Arcite praises in the last act is Mars "that heal'st with blood / The earth when it is sick, and cur'st the world / O' th' plurisy of people" (V.i.64-66). Palamon in the play, on the other hand, prays to Venus and as a result an old man is to be rejuvenated:

The aged cramp

Had screwed his square foot round,

The gout had knit his fingers into knots,

Torturing convulsions from his globy eyes

Had almost drawn their spheres, that what was life

In him seemed torture. (V.i.110-15)

In such a grotesque circumstance even fathering a child appears to be more of a harm than a cure. One of the most disturbing elements of the final movement of the play is indeed a sequence of childbirth images that reverses the hopeful sense of organic continuity through which the late romances transmute tragic pain. The lapse between beginnings and endings is highlighted in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* through its methods of composition. Acts I and V are written by Shakespeare, whereas the center of the play is almost wholly by Fletcher; "the resulting uneven texture curiously amplifies the crucial issues; though the work can never be totally satisfying, its disjunction has considerable power" (Berggren 1984, p.9).

On both occasions, that is, the impulse to "preserve the ideal intact through withdrawal from temptation" (73) is as Richard Hillman observes in "*Shakespeare's Romantic Innocents and the Misappropriation of the Romance Past: The Case of The Two Noble Kinsmen*", "immediately frustrated by intrusive circumstances - the news of war, the sight of Emilia" (73). The very resistance to the moral complexities they demonstrate and is attained through maturity appears to be provoking the "onslaught of experience" (73); an attitude of passive irresponsibility is endorsed through Theseus's use of an "acknowledgement of human childishness ('still / Are children in some kind') to ('Let us be thankful / For that which is')" (qtd. in Hillman 1991, p.73). What, as the prime value, should be placed at the pinnacle of the play then appears to be misplaced; Emilia's ideal of innocence and same-sex friendship thus perceived comes to be "an ideal that Shakespeare, at least, is generally taken to celebrate, if not to share personally, even by critics who note the similarity between her reminiscence of the perfect harmony she enjoyed with Flavina as a young girl" (73). This rather shaky treatment of a value through resorting to childhood and innocence does not go well with the heroic atmosphere already brought into play through allusion to Chaucer's "The Knight's tale" and implies reconciliation and submission. As Richard Hillman argues Shakespeare and Fletcher, are apparently far from "misappropriating the romance, even if they skew its rueful irony regarding human subjection to chance, coincidence, and above all Venus, to match the intensely personal bitterness of a Shakespeare looking dim-eyed at innocence and seeing salvation disappear with puberty" (69). In his discussion Philip Edwards puts much emphasis upon "'a Chaucerian view of the frailty of our determinations" (qtd. in Hillman 1991, p. 69) in making his case for a fundamental continuity of vision. It is as if having just recently bid farewell to the imperfect magic of his art in *The Tempest*, "the world-weary bard returns for a curtain call in the role of Theseus, presiding sagely over the fading of another insubstantial pageant" (69):

O you heavenly charmers,

What things you make of us! For what we lack

We laugh, for what we have are sorry; still

Are children in some kind. Let us be thankful

For that which is, and with you leave dispute

That are above our question. Let's go off

And bear us like the time. (5.4.131)

The Theme of Resignation

Indeed, Theseus' magisterial resignation in the play might appear to take us beyond the threat of 'despair' that troubles Prospero's 'ending' in *The Tempest.* At least on first reading, a refreshingly dispassionate corrective to the construction of authorial disillusion as Hillman states is "E. Talbot

Donaldson's: corrective to the construction of recent argument" (70). That *The Two Noble Kinsmen* decisively shifts responsibility for the bittersweet outcome through portraying the gods, not as agents of fatality, but as emblems of destructive desires and values 'in the hearts of Theseus, of Hippolyta, of Palamon, and of Arcite' (qtd. in Hillman 1991, p.70). From this viewpoint in the Chaucerian manner, it is Only Emilia that remains 'helpless before chance' (qtd. in Hillman 1991, p.70). Through Emilia's sustained exaltation of same-sex friendship over heterosexual love, yet this exception points to a recuperation of Edwards' basic position. For by taking at face value, "Donaldson rejoins the critical mainstream (even more recently swollen by the contribution of Eugene M. Waith)" (70), which by itself makes an effort to locate the tragic component of the tragicomedy fundamentally at the loss of an ideal of innocence.

Even though *The Two Noble Kinsmen* in fact dramatizes Geoffrey Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and generally remains faithful to its story of "brother[s] / ysworn ful depe," who fatally fall into an Amazonian princess, the two dramatists endeavor to signify a difference in the nature of kinsmen's relationships. Shakespeare and Fletcher's Palamon and Arcite imagine themselves to be perfect friends in the classical tradition of Aristotle and Cicero, two men are as Robert Stretter states "unified by virtue and mutual affection to the point where individuality blurs" (270). This very same-sex relationship is mirrored by another, that is the one formed between Emilia and her girlhood friend Flavina that is not in Chaucer's story. The question that here might arise is concerned with the significance of such close relationships in such a play when the outcome brings about naught but failure particularly in the case of Palamon and Arcite that might most probably remind one of the Renaissance scholar Thomas Elyot's description of such relationships: "an entire consent of willes and desires" (qtd. in Stretter 2017, p.270). Although both are presented in their utterly noble state, same-sex friendship eventually proves noticeably fragile and thus naturally vulnerable to external forces. As Robert Stretter in his essay "*Flowers of Friendship: Amity and Tragic Desire in The Two Noble Kinsmen"* argues that "idealized same-sex friendship provides the occasion for tragedy—and although identified as a tragicomedy when entered in the Stationers' Register in 1634, the *Kinsmen* is far more tragedy than comedy" (270). The way both Shakespeare and Fletcher place the friends in this play in the world of dangerous and threatening desires is in a way strengthened by the play's dark tone which is far darker than the one noticed in the Chaucerian play. It is in such a world that such friendship "disintegrates in the face of an inexorable drive toward marriage and procreation. The fragility of friendship can be seen most clearly in "the play's 'garden scene' (attributed to Fletcher)" (271). When speaking for many Shakespearean critics E. T. Donaldson refers to *The Two Noble Kinsmen* as "that most distressing of plays." (qtd. in Stretter 2017, p.272). Whereas this play exhibits the symbolic, emblematic, nonnaturalistic style that is typical of Shakespeare's late work, it as Stretter states "lacks any sense of the benign providence and magical rejuvenation that many find so compelling in The *Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest"* (272).

Even though it is true that Shakespeare throughout his work generally encourages the view that same-sex friendship is a stage to be left behind with puberty or marriage, he also appears to be somehow "fascinated by the possibilities that alternative forms of identity have for allowing individuals to experience a kind of living death" (288). That is no wonder then that either of these sworn brothers is to be doomed to winning the desired Princess's hand at the expense of the other's experiencing a tragic death.

It is also in Yeats's *Death of Cuchulain* that the completion of the hero's initiation leads to his unity goes through the process of dissolution. The end of the cycle is supposed to eventually finalize in unification with the sublime particularly when the tragic joy has also been felt, but When Cuchulain '*enters wounded*' after the battle, as Alexandra Paulain states in *The King's Threshold, Calvary, The Death of Cuchulain*: *Yeats's Passion Plays*, he expresses a sense of "disorientation ('Where am I? Why am I here?') which suggests the beginning of delirium" (188). Moreover, the stage-directions including the bare stage accompanied by the presence of the old man who might belong to any period as if taken out from mythology. Even though Cuchulain has always performed great deeds in his life time and has

experienced being a man of action, the time has eventually come for him to try and reconcile both forces . At the "*axis mundi,* he can escape from the turning movement of the wheel of life and get to a balance" (Paulain 2013, p.115).

The extended delirium of the dying Cuchulain, is in fact structured like a dream in the play. If this dreams as Katharine Worth has remarked, be considered as "an open question" (Paulain 188), then its answer can be detected in the final song: "an old man looking back on life | Imagines it [Cuchulain's body] in scorn" (qtd. in Paulain 2013, p. 188). In comparison with Strinberg, who had invented the dramaturgy of the dreamplay to create the paradox of a subjective theatre, Yeats takes the form "further and stages a dream without a dreamer – or with a plurality of authors/ dreamers" (188). The play dreams the death of Cuchulain; it gives shape to the dying hero's delirium, yet what makes the play so uniquely delirious is as Alexandra Paulain argues in *The King's Threshold, Calvary, The Death of Cuchulain*: *Yeats's Passion Plays*, "the splitting of the dreaming subjectivity. Death, the coming apart of the subject, is thus encoded in the structure of the play"(188).

Conclusion

If Yeats's undertaking in his last plays, according to Alexandra Paulain, be regarded as essentially to "find a theatrical from which he might probe the unknowable experience of death make visible the otherworld, and it be from the threshold of death", then it would be no wonder if he, when finding himself in deathbed, succumbs to the unknown nature of death in a reconciliatory manner. The manner implied does not sound much unlike the one deployed at the end of Fletcher-Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen* when it is inferred that

Let us be thankful

For that which is, and with you leave dispute

That are above our question. Let's go off

And bear us like the time. (5.4.131)

When there comes a time when there is no time for enquiring the invisible unknown nature of death, the heroic Cuchulain in W.B. Yeats's *The Death of Cuchulain* like the aged poet-dramatist that in his turn following the other magnificent aged bard, who happens to be "the master of the monument" , succumbs to the finality of the road in the final song in a reconciliatory manner:

No body like his body

Has modern woman borne,

But an old man looking back in life

Imagines it in scorn.

A statue's there to mark the place,

By Oliver Sheppard done.

So ends the tale that the harlot

Sang to the beggar-man. (Yeats 2011, 554)

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